# THE GHOST OF PRIVATE CARTER

by

Tony Gabriele

The ghost was remarkably substantial. For a ghost, that is. Yes, he did come straight through the wall of my house as if it weren't there, which of course it wasn't when he was living. But when he was close I could hear sounds he made – not just his voice, but the clink the tin cup made as it bumped on the belt to which it was attached, the soft rattle of the rounds in his cartridge pouch. I could swear there was even a smell, the faintest sour odor of a wool uniform that had been sweated in for many days.

At first sight, I thought he was one of Sam Potter's re-enactor buddies. Sam and a couple of others had stopped by shortly before, decked out in their gray uniforms, on their way home from drilling for an upcoming reenactment. The battle of I forget where, some unlucky Virginia crossroads or another where Americans had famously shot each other up. Sam wanted to borrow a book of 19th century photographs I had. I'd always thought this re-enactor business was just a tad silly – grown men dressing up and playing soldier – but Sam and the others were serious about the roles they played, and there was nothing fatuous in their manner.

Sam drove off and I went back in the house. Passing by the window, I glanced back outside, idly contemplating the dust still hanging in the air, kicked up in my driveway by the wheels of Sam's departing pickup. Then I saw him. He stood in the yard, rifle on his

shoulder, looking about as if he didn't know quite where to go. Had one of them stayed behind, I wondered?

Then he turned and saw me, and he began walking towards me. Somehow I managed to avoid screaming when he passed through the wall, though I did reel backwards a few feet.

"Pardon my botherin' you, sir," he said. His voice was soft. His face was young – 20 years old, maybe. He hadn't shaved recently, and longish sandy-colored hair curled down behind his ears. Even in the shadow of his slouch hat, his blue eyes were the brightest thing about his person, except for perhaps the still-shiny brass belt buckle with "CS" on it. His mismatched clothes – gray jacket, brown trousers – hung loosely on him. The top of his left shoe was beginning to separate from the sole.

"I heard the shootin'," he continued. "And I – I cain't find my regiment."

Shooting? Sam and his imitation Confederates? They'd been drilling somewhere nearby, maybe at the old battlefield less than a mile from my house, firing off their black powder rifles, no bullets of course.

"Your regiment?" I asked when I had recovered my voice.

“Twenty-second North Carolina Infantry,” he said. “Like I said, I don’t know where the regiment is.” With an embarrassed smile he added, “Fact is, I don’t know for sure where I am.”

My mind slowly constructed the sentence: You are talking to a ghost. The ghost of a Civil War soldier. My mind didn’t want to believe itself, but the apparition remained before me, unmoving. His shoes were muddy, but they had left no tracks on my floor.

“Well, uh -- what’s the last thing you remember?” I asked the ghost.

“I fell sick. We was marchin’ up the road, an’ I tripped an’ took a tumble. Landed on a sharp rock and cut up my leg. Didn’t seem too bad, but then blood poisonin’ set in an’ I got feverish. They lay me down in a tent, an’ well, I cain’t remember much after that.”

Blood poisoning. It would have been likely. Lord, the lack of good medical treatment back then. No wonder six hundred thousand died.

“But I must’ve gotten over it. See, there ain’t even a mark on me now.” He lifted up a ragged trouser leg to show a bony, but unscarred, shin. “I’m as good as new. But please, sir, I need to find my regiment. The Yankees are comin’ up the road and they might catch me here. I reckon my regiment’s gone ahead to the fortifications at Yorktown.”

Fortifications at Yorkdown. That would be the Peninsular campaign of 1862, the huge Union army under McClellan marching up from Fort Monroe, the outnumbered Confederates digging in across the Peninsula, trying to slow their advance toward Richmond. No, this can't be happening. Have I fallen asleep while reading a history book and am dreaming this?

"What will you do at Yorktown?" I asked.

The soldier frowned. "I shouldn't be talking about all this," he said. "The captain told us to be careful what we say to strangers in these parts about where the army's headin'. They might be federal spies."

I told him I had lived in York County for 30 years, which seemed to satisfy him.

The urgency returned to his voice. "Sir, if you could point me the way towards Yorktown, I'd be much obliged."

Feeling disoriented, I had to look around to get a fix on my 21st century surroundings. The yard was there as always, the road out front, the house across the street. The dust from the driveway had settled. "That road over there," I finally said, turning back. "That will …" He was gone. I stood there a long time, looking around the room. No, I concluded, I'm not dreaming.

The second appearance came the following Saturday. I had heard no gunfire – wind from a different quarter, probably – but I suppose he did. The young solider was standing in my yard as before. Again he saw me standing at the window, and again he walked through the wall, for which I was a little better prepared this time.

“Pardon me botherin’ you, sir,” he said, repeating his opening words from the last time. “I heard the shootin’, And I – I cain’t find my regiment.”

I decided I should repeat my opening words, too. “Your regiment?”

“Twenty-second North Carolina Infantry,”

I had gone to the library that week and done some research. “Your regiment was raised in western North Carolina, wasn’t it?” I asked.

The ghost smiled. “Yep,” he said. “I’m from Company B, from McDowell County. We mustered in at the county courthouse, then marched to Raleigh. Then we took the train up to Richmond – first train ride of my life it was, too – and eventually we was put under the command of General Joe Johnston, who marched us down here.”

“Why did you enlist?”

“Shoot, ‘most all us boys in town did. We had this big rally, an’ our congressman gave a speech about how the North was fixin’ to invade us, an’ we all had to defend our state. Woulda felt mean, not to enlist when all the other fellows were. Tell you, though, I didn’t know soldierin’ would involve this much walkin’. You ever been a soldier?”

“Yes,” I said. But not like you, I thought. One hitch in the Army, middle of the Vietnam War but missed it all, safe in a desk job. Chairborne ranger. A lot wider around the middle, too, than the slender wraith standing before me. I asked him what his home was like.

“My folks have a farm down there. They used to grow tobacco, but the tobacco won’t grow like it used to. The soil’s getting wore out, they claim They’re raisin’ hogs more, nowadays. Anyways, money was kinda scarce, so I took a job clerkin’ in a store two years ago, in town. That’s what I was doin’ up until I joined th’ army. What’s your business now?”

I work at NASA, I didn’t know how I could explain to a 19$^{th}$ century country boy what I did there. I just told him I was mechanic and let it go at that.

“Do you miss your home?” I asked.

“I’ll show you what I miss,” he said, reaching into his shirt pocket. From it he withdrew a pocket New Testament. A parting gift from his parents, I guessed.

“I don’t read it as much as I oughter,” he allowed. “Exceptin’ last week, a rumor went ‘round that the Yankees were going to attack us the next mornin’. I read it plenty that night, I can tell you. But here’s what I mean,” He opened the little book and took out a photograph that was tucked inside. “We are promised to each other,” he said.

The girl in the photograph was dark-haired and dark-eyed, the same age as the soldier or maybe a year or two younger. She wore the solemn expression that was the custom for photographic portraiture at the time. She did not look especially pretty, but you could sense that she became pretty when she smiled. “Once we whip Abe Lincoln’s boys and I can head home,” the soldier went on, “we shall be married.”

But you won’t get home, I thought to myself. You will never see her, or North Carolina, again. You’ll die here, in some muddy campground in York County, Virginia. Die for a cause that wasn’t as good as you were. Maybe your bones lie in the earth of my own yard, and that’s why you’ve appeared in front of me. And her bones are lying in the earth somewhere, too. What happened to her? Did she marry someone else? Did she tell her children about you? Does anyone remember you?

And then the photograph, and the soldier, were gone again.

His next appearance came at dusk, while I was outside picking up some storm-downed tree branches. This time I heard him before I saw him. “Pardon me botherin’ you, sir,”

the voice came from behind me. He remained in that continuous moment, 145 years in the past. If he had any memory of our earlier conversations, he didn't reveal it.

It occurred to me that I had not, in his earlier appearances, asked him his name. "Private Jesse Carter, sir," he said when I finally inquired.

"Tell me something, Jesse," I asked him, "is there anything about the way I'm dressed that strikes you as strange?" I was wearing a sweatsuit. It was an old sweatsuit, but I was pretty sure it hadn't been a fashion item in the 1860s. "Or anything about my house, or that house over there, that seems odd to you?"

The soldier hesitated. "Tell you the truth," he finally said, "that illness of mine must still be botherin' me a mite. Doin' something to my eyesight. I look at you and, well, you're all kinda fuzzy like. Can't make you out clear. Same with the house, too. But the ground and the trees and the sky, I can see them plenty clear. Guess that sounds mighty queer."

"No," I said, "illness is a funny thing."

"And I see something else – I think."

"What?"

“Other soldiers, lots of ‘em. Like me, except I see Yank solders, too. Only they’re like shadows. I call out to ‘em and they don’t answer. They just keep movin’ along, through the fields and the woods, like …”

“Like they were looking for their regiments?”

“I guess so. Like I need to get back to mine. I hear the shootin’ and I hear the drums, an’ I …”

I reached out and put my hand on his shoulder, half fearing that hand would pass through him like it was trying to lean on smoke. But it rested on something, something insubstantial but still there, resisting dissolution like a persistent memory.

“Listen to me, Jesse,” I said. “The war is over.”

There was a long silence. “It’s over?” he said, finally. “Who won?”

Well. I didn’t need to tell him the whole truth. “It was a glorious victory for the South,” I said, “led by the gallant sons of North Carolina.”

He dared a smile. “That a fact?,” he said. “But, wait, I hear th’ guns, I hear th’ drums.”

“Believe me, Jesse, your armies are gone, even though the guns and the drums are still here. There are people who dress up like you and your comrades, and like Union soldiers too, and they wear blue and gray and fire off their black powder and pretend they were you. There will be more and more of that, because a big anniversary is coming up in a couple of years, and there will be more guns and more drums. It their way of honoring you, of remembering you. ”

The ghost stood there and stared at me, not speaking. I could tell I wasn’t making any sense to him, but I couldn’t stop trying to explain. Somehow, the more I talked to him the more uneasy I felt at his presence. I owed him something, if for no other reason than he had marched half out of his shoes, slept on the ground in heat and rain and lived on hard crackers, boiled peanuts and half-cooked bacon, when he could get it, all for the opportunity to charge against lead balls aimed to rip his bowels apart. And I hadn’t.

“Do other people – remember us?” he said hesitantly.

“Some do,” I said. “In fact, we’ve made you into a tourist attraction. Yes, Private Carter, you’re a money-making proposition to us. Because that’s what we do, Jesse, we take you and the others like you, all the way back to the poor souls who arrived a ways up the road in 1607 and got themselves starved to death, and we sit down and calculate how you can improve our hotel occupancy rates and how we can sell you in the gift shop. And that’s not what you marched here for, is it?”

The ghost said nothing. He seemed to have stopped listening to me. And why should he listen to this damn fool, pointlessly babbling about a century in the far future? Was there anything I could say that would help him, comfort him? Or was he doomed to stay, suspended here forever between his time and mine? The thought stabbed me with pity and sorrow.

"Go home, Jesse," I pleaded. "The hell with that war of yours, and go home. If it's possible for you to stand here and talk to me, and possible for me to see and talk to you, then maybe it's possible somehow for you to get back to that sweet girl in McDowell County. Please, go home."

He had turned his head slightly and raised it towards the darkening sky, as if listening for a distant sound. Then he looked back at me and said, simply, "I got to find my regiment." Private Jesse Carter, 22th North Carolina Infantry, died of illness near Yorktown, Virginia, in the spring of 1862, shouldered his rifle, turned, and walked across my yard and into the adjoining woods.

And as he walked through the trees, becoming the faintest discernible movement in the last light of day, there was more movement in the woods and the others were there, too, dozens then hundreds, the shadows of an army, walking like him, Northerners and Southerners alike, whose earthly march had ended in the fields and woods and swamps that were now the county's placid suburbs. Seeking their regiments, seeking answers,

seeking an end to their war, a war that does not die but still echoes in the air here like the crackle of rifles and the long, long roll of the drum.